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**A CASE STUDY IN LEADERSHIP –  
COLONEL PAUL EMIL VON LETTOW-VORBECK**

**BY**

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## ABSTRACT

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Never captured nor defeated in battle, Colonel Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck successfully fought the British for four years with virtually no external support from Germany. Through brilliant leadership and unequalled use of terrain and weapons placement Lettow-Vorbeck rapidly moved his army across the rugged terrain of Africa and conducted numerous raids and ambushes against the British in East Africa.

Only after the war was lost in Europe did Lettow-Vorbeck surrender. His professionalism and leadership style earned him the utmost of respect from his adversaries. Studying Lettow-Vorbeck as a gifted military leader who conducted a strategic guerrilla campaign against overwhelming odds and continually won, demonstrates how a numerically inferior force can achieve success on the battlefield.



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## A CASE STUDY IN LEADERSHIP—COLONEL PAUL EMIL VON LETTOW-VORBECK

### GERMAN EAST AFRICA – TANZANIA

In 1914, German East Africa (Tanzania), a German protectorate since 1890 was bordered in the north by British East Africa, in the east by the Indian Ocean and in the south by Portuguese East Africa. Its area was approximately twice the size of Spain. Average annual rainfall was one meter with the heaviest occurring during the months of December through March. Average annual temperatures ranged around 73 degrees Fahrenheit.<sup>1</sup> East-West movement, communication and travel was primarily conducted via the northern and central railways, two focal points that proved to be difficult to control and maintain in the coming years.

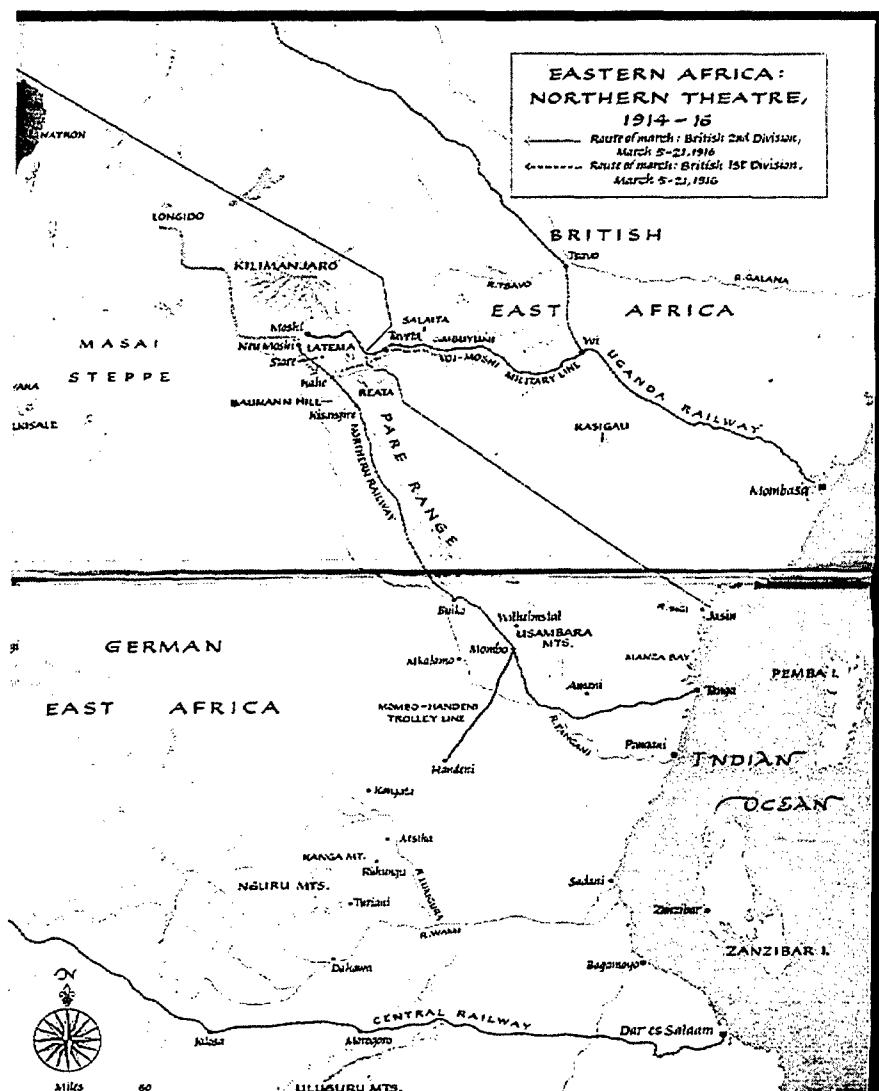


FIGURE 1. EAST AFRICA 1914-1916

## STRATEGIC SETTING

The British fought a conventional war in Africa. Although they eventually controlled the waterways, ports and railways they did not focus properly on the destruction of the enemy force. As a result, large numbers of British soldiers were committed needlessly in protecting low value targets. Lettow-Vorbeck, on the other hand, continued to learn over the course of the campaign and modified his tactics and method of waging war accordingly. For example, during the battle of Jasin in 1915, although declared a German victory, Lettow-Vorbeck lost fifteen percent of the regular German officers that were engaged in that action.<sup>2</sup> It was in fact a pyrrhic victory and one that Lettow-Vorbeck could ill afford to repeat if he was to conduct a campaign that would drain British resources. By all estimates, if Lettow-Vorbeck sustained losses that great in number in just a few more battles, the British could have eliminated the threat to British East Africa. Therefore, Lettow-Vorbeck was forced to learn from his early battles and change the way he conducted warfare or risk elimination. He could ill afford to become decisively engaged. He had to fight a war of quick strikes conducted by small forces and then withdraw to a safe and secure location. Preservation of the small army became a top priority. Lettow-Vorbeck realized that if he were to be successful, he needed to strike blows only occasionally and to restrict his soldiers principally to guerrilla warfare, therefore, the old Schutztruppe field manual was about to come into its own.<sup>3</sup>

## DECISIVE POINT

The British identified the railways, ports, and the Indian Ocean access as their decisive points in Africa. By focusing on these areas the British employed vast amounts of resources to eventually control them. However, the British strategy of seizing these key points did not provide for strategic success, specifically the destruction of the German force in East Africa because Lettow-Vorbeck never intended to rely on external support from either the sea or railway. In fact, Lettow-Vorbeck had already decided to wage a guerrilla type campaign effort that would not become dependent on those specific locations. Simply put, the British attacked and secured areas of no interest to their enemy.

Lettow-Vorbeck's military strength derived from the ability to be self-sufficient and foot mobile and this is how he built his force. Raids would be conducted by small groups of armed men. Fortunately, the British commanders never fully realized this and failed to accurately identify the German strategic decisive points in Africa. If the British were to win in East Africa, they had to defeat the Schutztruppe. To accomplish this required them to remove the German ability to maneuver freely on the battlefield. Seizure of key terrain was not critical to the German

strategic plan but rather the utilization of terrain as an avenue for continuous movement. If the British were to win this war, they had to deny the Germans the ability of free movement yet four years later they still were unable to accomplish this task. In any ordinary war, the control of the Northern Railroad, the Central Railroad and the Indian Ocean beyond would almost certainly mean victory. General Smuts (the British general) was still fighting an ordinary war but this was not an ordinary war!<sup>4</sup>

## LETTOW-VORBECK: THE INDIVIDUAL

### BACKGROUND

The son of a German general, Lieutenant Colonel Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck was every inch the Prussian officer the day he stepped off the German mail steamer in Dar es Salaam harbor and prepared to call on his superior officer, Governor Heinrich Schnee.<sup>5</sup> He was a model German officer; smart, articulate, disciplined with the charisma and leadership ability to lead thousands, Lettow-Vorbeck was destined to be a great leader and general officer one day within the German army.

Throughout his career, Lettow-Vorbeck spent an inordinate amount of time away from Germany. As a result, he developed an extensive background with first hand knowledge and experience in the establishment of colonial defenses and the training and development of non-regular German soldiers. Additionally, he possessed the rare ability to understand how certain military actions have a cause and effect resulting in planned or unplanned second and third order effects. This gift or vision to grasp a battlefield and its associated impacts allowed him as a leader to plan operations at the strategic level and transcend operational effects to tactical execution with ease. He was an extremely well trained, clever, far-seeing man and accomplished soldier.<sup>6</sup>

Although his strengths laid in detailed training, his units usually excelled because of his insistence on excellence and perfection in all endeavors. Soldiers that worked for Lettow-Vorbeck either exceeded established standards or continued to train until they master the assigned task be it road marching, drill and ceremony or marksmanship.

As far as understanding the situation in Africa, Lettow-Vorbeck's extensive time abroad helped him to understand the social aspects and cultures that differed from the German way of life. His assignment to German East Africa was especially important because the German High Command (German General Staff) felt that the defense force there was inadequate and needed a strong disciplinarian to whip it into shape.<sup>7</sup> If this is what Germany desired, then Lettow-

Vorbeck was the leader who could make it happen and this became his mission for the next few years.

## STRATEGY

Lettow-Vorbeck, a fine, distinguished military officer with the finest of upbringing developed a campaign plan from the very first day that he set foot in German East Africa. He traveled throughout the land, appraised the training situation of the armed force there, and realized the untapped potential of many of the retired Germans who had chosen this place as their retirement homes. These men had served honorably and faithfully to the German government in many forms of military roles from senior army commanders to logisticians in both the army and navy. Lettow-Vorbeck was blessed with many people throughout the region that could provide substantial aid and support if required.

War on the European continent was quickly approaching. Because of the distance involved and the identification of any effort in East Africa as secondary for Berlin, Lettow-Vorbeck realized that any operations in his region would have to be conducted with virtually no external support. Therefore, shortly after his arrival in East Africa Lettow-Vorbeck began to frame his strategic concept for waging war. By answering his own rhetorical questions he derived a campaign plan that would last for several years. If Lettow-Vorbeck could answer the following question that he posed to himself, he could also determine the manner in which he would be required to wage war. The question then was, "Whether it was possible in East Africa to exercise any influence on the great decision at home by actions within the African continent?"<sup>8</sup> Lettow-Vorbeck spent the next few months determining precisely how this would be done.

Fighting a prolonged effort in German East Africa would be difficult. Lettow-Vorbeck was faced with the harsh terrain and environment of his surroundings. The topography of Africa would be the German strategic vulnerability. In fact, it would prove to be both a weakness and strength.<sup>9</sup> Lettow-Vorbeck also quickly came to another realization that the ultimate fate of the German colony in East Africa would not depend on the result of the campaign in East Africa, but on the result of the war as a whole.<sup>10</sup> Thus, he began to formulate a strategic plan that he would have to maintain a force with sizable strength that would fight offensively only when opportunities existed, delaying actions when required, and to avoid risking the destruction of his force in a general action fought to the finish that would only result in a drastic failure of his supporting role.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, he could not wage a war based upon decisive engagement but

rather conduct a war based on a series of quick, short duration raids with self-preservation from constant movement.

Lettow-Vorbeck decided that his strategy must force the British to engage in a major commitment to war in East Africa that would drain British and Allied resources throughout the continent and Europe and to do this for as long as it took Germany to become victorious.<sup>12</sup> To accomplish this, Lettow-Vorbeck needed to develop the Schutztruppe force, one that would be able to fight, sustain themselves and win on the battlefield even though they would be outnumbered at times from larger sized forces possibly as great as ten to one.<sup>13</sup> For the Germans to succeed in East Africa they had to remain mobile, survive and force the commitment of additional forces by their adversaries. Lettow-Vorbeck had to make the British focus on the destruction of his force while he would continue to remain on the move drawing more and more of the British after him and away from other German forces near Berlin.

Lettow-Vorbeck's source of power (operational center of gravity) was his army, the Schutztruppe. He had to make them an effective fighting force to remain successful. Through constant pressure, he produced the desired effect. He sapped British morale enormously. European colonists demanded reinforcement of British East Africa to drive the Germans away and each time an individual or piece of equipment arrived in Africa, Lettow-Vorbeck realized that he was succeeding.<sup>14</sup>

## **OPERATIONAL LINKS: LEADER, TERRAIN, AND RAILWAY SYSTEM**

### **WHY LETTOW-VORBECK WAS SENT TO GERMAN EAST AFRICA**

German East Africa was important to Germany for several reasons. First and foremost it offered them land from which resources of materiel and personnel could be acquired. Additionally, it allowed them the opportunity for expansion of their homeland. Finally, it was an extension of their way of life, societal values and provided some the opportunity for prosperity.

In the early 1900s, Africa was still in many aspects an uncultured society. Tribal chieftains ruled, however, Africa, specifically German East Africa still provided a valuable resource that to date had been untapped. The Germans wanted to seize this opportunity and needed a young, military leader along with the proper upbringing, influence and knowledge that could get what Germany knew was available. Lettow-Vorbeck proved to be this man. In fact, the staff officer who had Lettow-Vorbeck assigned to German East Africa may have been a genius for there was no man in the entire German establishment who had the experience or the deep interest in colonial defense problems that could rope in all that was desired and provide substantial return to the government for their minimal investment.<sup>15</sup>

Shortly after his arrival, Lettow-Vorbeck immediately went to work as the senior military leader in German East Africa. He traveled extensively throughout the land, visited places, key regions, port facilities and observed first hand the railway operations. If Lettow-Vorbeck were to be responsible to prepare the available German forces for a defense of the German territory, it meant that he had to use what was available within the local populace. One also assumed that external support would not be provided in case of outbreak of a major war on the European continent due to the distance involved, poor communication infrastructure and essentially a weak navy when compared to many other countries in the early 1900s.

Lettow-Vorbeck's training base of men consisted of African soldiers who were barely organized into small, ineffectual units, many of which were untrained. These men or "Askaris" as they were popularly known became an effective fighting force under Lettow-Vorbeck's leadership and eventually became known as the "Schutztruppe." Lettow-Vorbeck had to assume that war would come and he had to make the Schutztruppe ready for it. But this was no simple matter.<sup>16</sup>

The defense force of German East Africa was not prepared for anything that Lettow-Vorbeck would soon create. It was not merely chance that brought him to German East Africa, but rather fate that the senior leaders in Germany determined was critical for the development of this territory. It was well known that Lettow-Vorbeck had been sent to German East Africa for a purpose. His mission was to bring the military up to a higher level of efficiency. Why otherwise would Berlin send such a highly trained officer to this region of the world?<sup>17</sup> In fact, it proved to be a blessing in disguise for no one could have imagined the impact that Lettow-Vorbeck would soon make upon the British in a region that was separate and far away from the European continent.

#### AFRICAN TERRAIN AND WILDLIFE

Another substantial advantage that the German army in East Africa had over the British was their extensive knowledge of the African environment, terrain and its inhabitants. Immediately upon his arrival, Lettow-Vorbeck began an extensive review of the land in East Africa (his entire future area of operations) to get a firsthand account of his surroundings and to better appreciate the harshness of the terrain. During these trips he met numerous retired German army and naval officers that provided him an immediate immense wealth of knowledge from a military perspective of the surrounding areas that unbeknownst to him at the time would reap benefits in the years to come. He would also come to learn about the rainy season, a three-month period of torrential downpour that made roads impassable and prevented vehicular

movement. He gained knowledge of the animals in the country. He discovered how the army ants would move to higher ground, which always precipitated the heavy rains. He learned to watch the animals such as roving giraffes that loved to knock down low hanging wires.<sup>18</sup> He became familiar with the dangers as well such as the tsetse fly; the malarialaden mosquito, elephants, lions and the extreme heat, which brought severe drought conditions to the land.

As the war waged on, Lettow-Vorbeck's knowledge of Africa continued to benefit him greatly. He was well aware of the rainy season and properly judged that the British would have great difficulty in supplying their forces.<sup>19</sup> During many of his attacks and raids on the British, Lettow-Vorbeck quite often allowed the African terrain, weather and animals to do much of the work for him. In 1915 during a successful attack on the British garrison of Jasin, he conducted a siege on the British and just waited. The tsetse fly and anopheles mosquito were doing his work as the British garrison grew weaker every day.<sup>20</sup> It seemed as thought the British never truly understood the harsh African environment and its impact on their armed forces. They were never able to adapt to their surroundings, rather they continued on as though the battlefields were similar worldwide.

As the British continued their prolonged war effort in Africa using conventional tactics by moving in large sized units with tremendous logistical supply trains, they began to lose men by the thousands from non-combat injuries. In one case, the British lost 70 percent of their force to dysentery and malaria, which had taken enormous tolls on the British soldiers.<sup>21</sup> By the end of the campaign, the British had brought in sixty thousand transport animals and more than fifty-nine thousand of them had died on the long marches from tsetse fly fever, thirst and exhaustion. Of the hundreds of wagons and motor vehicles they used, almost all of them were out of action.<sup>22</sup> The Germans, however, continued to win the war with a smaller, quicker, less supplied force that moved within the confines of the African terrain rather than try to fight it and force it to provide that which it cannot.

#### GERMAN INTERIOR LINE ADVANTAGE

The chief strategic feature of the German Protectorate was the Central Railway, which was completed shortly before the outbreak of war, and spanned the country from Dar es Salaam to Kigomo on Lake Tanganyika, a distance of 720 miles.<sup>23</sup> The Germans controlled the east-west lines of communication within East Africa. If attacked, the Germans held the upper hand. Everything at the outbreak of war was highly favorable to the Germans for a prolonged resistance. They had the initial advantage of interior lines through their recently built transportation system of railroads.<sup>24</sup> The German railway system centrally located and running

east west was defensible, however, the British transportation system in the north looped back on itself and was easily within raiding distance of forces that crossed the border. The main artery of the British territory, the Ugandan railway could be attacked repeatedly and the attack of that most sensitive strategic nerve should bring in swarms of British troops.<sup>25</sup>

The significance of the railway system was that it tremendously improved communications throughout East Africa. As a result, the strategic significance of this piece of land increased tremendously to both Great Britain and Germany and Germany held all of the cards through their control of the transportation system.

## THE ART OF WARFARE

### DOCTRINE

### MANEUVER

Lettow-Vorbeck's experience provided him with first hand knowledge of how a small band of highly motivated men could keep a much larger, much better organized, modern military force at bay and actually run rings around them. He saw it happen.<sup>26</sup> From that point on, Lettow-Vorbeck decided to create a force that relied on speed and mobility that would guarantee him success against a numerically superior foe. Fortunately, Lettow-Vorbeck's force never lost their freedom of movement even though they were a foot mobile force. The Germans conducted raids against the British in German East Africa, Portuguese East Africa, Rhodesia and British East Africa. The British on the other hand, tried unsuccessfully to use their advantage in technology and weapons without truly adapting to the terrain or environment upon which they waged war. Attacking with far superior forces in both numbers of men and equipment, the British force became encumbered and very slow moving. The British lost several opportunities to destroy their enemy because of their failure to remain as mobile as their adversaries. During one such encounter near the town of Kangata in 1916, the British attacked with multiple forces using armored cars in an attempt to destroy one element of Lettow-Vorbeck's army. Blocking the withdrawal exit to the south and surrounded by mountains on all other sides, it appeared that the Germans were enveloped and trapped. However, Lettow-Vorbeck's soldiers had fortunately planned for multiple withdrawal routes. By successfully crossing the rugged mountains on foot, the Germans escaped yet again. This particular action was the best indication yet of the maneuvering superiority of a force of men unencumbered with wagons, mules, trucks, and armored cars who had to rely on human foot power and had learned to do so under the leadership of Lettow-Vorbeck.<sup>27</sup>

## CAMPAIGN PLAN OF RAIDS AND RAILWAY ATTACKS

The central railway became the focus and target of Lettow-Vorbeck's units. He realized the importance of the railways and how vital they were to the protection of British interests within the region. The railways allowed people to travel west through barren regions of Eastern Africa for further development, expansion and additionally, new, potential conquests for Britain. The Ugandan railway in the north vicinity of the cities of Mombasa and Tanga thus became the targets of Lettow-Vorbeck's attacks. For this campaign, Lettow-Vorbeck decided to conduct a twelve-month siege on this part of the railway. He fully understood and hoped that the British realized the implications and grave nature of his actions. Lettow-Vorbeck wanted to draw the British to this area and away from Berlin.

To conduct these railway and city attacks, Lettow-Vorbeck needed a small force that could move quickly and strike at the time of his desire. One hundred miles of the northern railway was within a three-day march from his bases near the Kilimanjaro foothills in German East Africa. The closeness of the railway to the border easily afforded Lettow-Vorbeck the opportunity to wage this campaign.<sup>28</sup> If Lettow-Vorbeck's attacks were successful, the British would have to close down the railroad. If this were the case, the resulting impact to British confidence, interior security, transportation lines and communication would essentially close off the entire interior of British East Africa from external support. The only options left to the British at this point would be to allow Lettow-Vorbeck to continue his harassment of railway operations and the subsequent threaten to all interior located British subjects or bring in a large force to stop him. Either way, success for Lettow-Vorbeck was recognition of his exploits, fear of the loss of security to the central/inland British citizens and require the British command to commit forces to stop this German threat. Once again Lettow-Vorbeck was slowly progressing with his stated objective—cost the enemy heavily while only employing a slender force.<sup>29</sup> Lettow-Vorbeck was able to concentrate just enough forces against the transport system that connected east and west British East Africa to cause the British to commit additional forces. The aim of the British was a feeble attempt to keep the German forces at bay or even better, drive the Germans away from the railroad and out of British East Africa. As a result of Lettow-Vorbeck's repeated attacks the railway and towns of Mombasa and Tanga became an instrument of long-range German strategy in East Africa.<sup>30</sup> As the British continued to commit resources against the German attacks, Lettow-Vorbeck became even more determined to his campaign efforts and drain British resources away from the European continent and in essence, Berlin.

As ammunition became critically low for the newer rifles, Lettow-Vorbeck had to resort to other means in which to continue the attack. His forces still possessed many of the old style of

rifles ('71) that used black powder. But, because of the black powder, these rifles when fired created a large puff of smoke that quickly gave away the position of the rifleman and the element of surprise was soon lost. Therefore, Lettow-Vorbeck modified the tactics his forces used to continue the attack. He decided to attack at night with the old style rifles. British Indians guarded many parts of the railway system. Lettow-Vorbeck's troops would sneak stealthily into close proximity of these Indian camps at night and then fired their old model 71 rifles. As the rifles were shot, a tremendous crack resulted from the exploding smoke and then the smoke would vanish into the night air without a trace. The Indian troops would panic while the wounded screamed further adding to the confusion of the moment. Then, Lettow-Vorbeck's Askaris would fire another round or two and once again, flee into the darkness from whence they came leaving another line camp confused and demoralized.<sup>31</sup> Success was again awarded to Lettow-Vorbeck's soldiers with minimal losses as he continued his attacks.

Other attempts by the British to stop the German attacks on their railway system also failed. Actions such as whitewashing the rails or spreading oil along the embankments would be used by the British to reveal German footprints and then allowed the British to track down the invaders. But, as it turned out, the raiders became even more skillful than the British in their attempts at deception. Lettow-Vorbeck's attacking forces soon began to carry their own paint and oil to cover their tracks and movements. In addition, the German soldiers became skillful wiretappers and used captured telephones to constantly monitor British conversations, troop and supply movements, and deployment schedules making it even easier to for them to ambush and gain critically needed supplies when possible.<sup>32</sup>

As a result of their continual success, morale within the German units rose dramatically. Camaraderie between officers, non-commissioned officers and regular soldiers grew in leaps and bounds. In fact, some of their boldest raids were designed to show the blacks just how powerful the Schutztruppe had become in an effort to recruit their relatives.<sup>33</sup> A great majority of German recruits fought throughout the entire campaign. As it became apparent that an everlasting bond was growing within his ranks, Lettow-Vorbeck approved accordingly. Very soon, blacks fought alongside whites and viewed each other as peers and soon taught each other a variety of aspects of warfare from tactics and professionalism to field craft and living off of the terrain.<sup>34</sup> Lettow-Vorbeck's small fighting force was growing by leaps and bounds with each success. As the British committed more resources to stop these German attacks, Lettow-Vorbeck became even more determined to continue them until his force was no longer needed. He would adapt, modify tactics and continue fighting a strategic war executed at the smallest of tactical levels.

## TRAINING

### MACHINE GUN EMPLACEMENT

Quick to engage with punishing fire, Lettow-Vorbeck's Germans ruthlessly employed machine guns with maximum effectiveness. Its fire was deadly and caused thousands of British casualties. Lettow-Vorbeck's soldiers became masters of clearing their fields of fire and massing interlocking fire with supporting flank and rear security elements. The machine guns were key to successful German ambushes and they were always employed with the concept of shoot and run in order to survive and fight another day. Upon firing, the Germans would clear the area, snap up the tripod legs and move the gun to a wooden frame so that the hot barrel would not burn the hands of the carriers and were off to a new position before the British could get their machine guns into the action.<sup>35</sup>

### FIELD CRAFT

Lettow-Vorbeck's soldiers became quite skillful at living off of the land or using captured supplies. Once, when supplies were low and many of his soldiers were without shoes Lettow-Vorbeck walked in the African bush without shoes or boots on his feet. Only when his feet became too sore for him to continue walking further did he relent and put his shoes back on. From then on he insisted that his soldiers wear shoes and boots to protect their feet. Adapting to the environment again became a German soldier specialty. Shoes and boots were made from buffalo hides. Women homespun uniforms from a local tree root that when properly processed provided a brownish-yellow dye that soon became the common color of the German military force's uniforms.<sup>36</sup> His goal was to have his army self-sufficient, able to live off of the land and survive in the African bush. As a result of Lettow-Vorbeck's insistence on self-sufficiency his army survived in the harsh environment where many others had failed. By the middle of 1918 the men of the Schutztruppe were the most self-sufficient guerrilla fighters in the history of modern warfare. For nine months they had lived entirely off of the land or from supplies captured from their enemies.<sup>37</sup>

### LEADER DEVELOPMENT

#### LEADER'S PRESENCE

As a leader, Lettow-Vorbeck appreciated the value of being at the right place at the right time. To prepare his forces for future battles he conducted extensive research on the terrain to frame for himself the eventual placement of his forces from which to conduct combat operations.

To learn how his soldiers performed and moved, oftentimes he would accompany a patrol in the bush.<sup>38</sup> During the heat of battle, Lettow-Vorbeck was quite often present, directing forces to prevent gaps, placing units to provide better flank security and employed and committed his reserve when required. He personally observed the enemy's actions during these same battles and watched their camps to determine the size of the enemy force as the dust rose from the ground when they moved.

### **LEADER'S RECONNAISSANCE**

In the middle of 1915, the British high command determined that an assault on Tanga, a port city that was key to controlling the northern railway be conducted. Thousands of troops began to gather in preparation for the attack. As the British refined their invasion plans, Lettow-Vorbeck quickly realized that Tanga would become their target. He immediately implemented a complex system of intelligence reporting through captured mail, telephone monitoring and updates from local people to keep him aware of the situation. Before the attack occurred, he went down and drove over every road in the area in an automobile and conferred with the local commander of the police force in the region to get a better appreciation of the terrain and get a first hand look at the situation himself.<sup>39</sup> To conduct his leader's reconnaissance, Lettow-Vorbeck utilized a variety of means such as bicycles, automobiles and more often than not, by foot. Lettow-Vorbeck knew that proper appreciation of the terrain was so critical to his plan that he conducted a reconnaissance on every mission whenever possible. Through his reconnaissance of the surrounding area prior to the invasion, Lettow-Vorbeck was able to use the terrain and available foliage to his advantage. He knew the invasion route and he was in Tanga well before the British began their invasion. This assault soon proved to be another example of how Lettow-Vorbeck was able to see the battlefield and execute a simple plan. The Germans held every advantage in terrain, weapons emplacement and use of foliage. Machine guns had well-planned fields of fire. Observers were well placed with communications to the ground forces. Snipers were situated high in the trees to provide unobstructed views of their intended targets. As expected, the plan worked to perfection.

### **VICTORY THROUGH SUPERIOR LEADERSHIP**

Almost as soon as it began, the British assault was over. The British were soundly defeated and the Germans gained supplies in both food and arms. The final score was approximately eight hundred British soldiers dead, five hundred wounded and several hundred missing. The Germans lost fifteen Europeans and fifty-four Askaris.<sup>40</sup> Lettow-Vorbeck's small force had vanquished a foe that was eight times greater. Once again, terrain appreciation

combined with proper placement of troops and weapons by Lettow-Vorbeck provided another lopsided victory for the German soldiers.

#### ORGANIZATION: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SCHUTZTRUPPE

The Germans prided themselves on becoming a professional army and this carried over no matter who belonged to the army. With Lettow-Vorbeck it was the same. He was a German officer and his soldiers were German soldiers. Therefore, their training and discipline would reflect that of a proper German army and he immediately set out to ensure that his desires would be met to his satisfaction and high standards. One of the first items that Lettow-Vorbeck focused on was the physical fitness of the soldiers and their marksmanship, a principle that he continually encouraged and trained to perfection. After war was declared, Lettow-Vorbeck began to institute a series of small patrols for the Schutztruppe for the sole purpose of increasing morale and confidence within his soldiers. He knew that the terrain would force his army to travel light if they were to remain mobile and this required meticulous attention to detail and planning. However, as the German army remained light and fleet of foot the loss of weight directly impacted on the strength of their firepower. The more they carried, the heavier the firepower, the lighter the load the less the firepower. Therefore, Lettow-Vorbeck planned a series of raids on the British railway system to test and develop the Schutztruppe's capabilities. These patrols were typically several days in duration lasting well over two hundred kilometers by foot. The Schutztruppe, moving on foot had to learn to live off of the land with short rations for days at a time, however, they moved fast, were ready for a fight upon arrival, maintained their mobility and succeeded.<sup>41</sup>

In the early stages of the war the Schutztruppe, developed rapidly under Lettow-Vorbeck's leadership. His continual insistence on perfection, his demand for results and success slowly began to emerge within the Africans. In barely three weeks, Lettow-Vorbeck's threadbare gang of fugitives had twice turned on a heavily armed posse to beat it senseless, steal its guns and leave it lying dazed and bleeding on the ground.<sup>42</sup> Morale surged within Lettow-Vorbeck's army and with each success his army's confidence grew and developed into a strengthened bond between leader and subordinate. Soon, noncombatants began to feel the flush of victory under this style of leadership. Large numbers of porters, those usually that were disinclined to place themselves in danger and often seeked the easier route were begging to be enrolled as Askaris (the African soldier that became an integral part of the German army).<sup>43</sup>

Another aspect of the development of the Schutztruppe stemmed from Lettow-Vorbeck's attention to detail, demand for mission accomplishment and objective focus. As his army

trained and grew Lettow-Vorbeck's orders were carried out without question. Loyalty became paramount and the Schutztruppe became a strong disciplined force. One example of this discipline was observed by a group of British scouts that had been sent forward after another defeat by the German army. As the British scouts moved ahead of the counter attacking force, they came across a campsite of the rear guard of the Schutztruppe. The rear guard's mission was to stay until the last of Lettow-Vorbeck's troops had departed the area and then immediately move out. So disciplined were these soldiers that as the last Schutztruppe soldier passed their position, they followed as instructed. The British scouts soon came upon their empty position and were astonished to find hot porridge still beside the fire. So disciplined were they that they moved off without having their breakfast.<sup>44</sup>

#### MATERIEL: RESUPPLY EFFORTS

External support from Germany was rare and extremely difficult. In addition, logistical demands upon Lettow-Vorbeck's army exceeded what could be stored or carried. Therefore, other means of resupply would have to be conducted. The land provided very little. To carry out a prolonged campaign, Lettow-Vorbeck and his army would have to capture needed supplies or go without. Fortunately, the Schutztruppe became quite adept and successful in this manner of logistical support. Their adversaries (Indians, other Africans, Portuguese, etc.) quite often were no match and routinely surrendered or ran from the battle leaving large amounts of critical supplies. Arms, ammunition, foodstuffs, field guns etc. were captured and used against the British continually throughout the next four years. This manner of resupply became so common, that Lettow-Vorbeck knew that whenever he opposed a British army comprised of Portuguese soldiers he often attacked with the primary purpose of acquiring captured supplies. Any encounter between them meant a distinct gain to the enemy in the way of arms, ammunition and supplies of all sorts, at a minimum of cost.<sup>45</sup>

#### SOLDIERS: MORALE – A FORCE MULTIPLIER

Lettow-Vorbeck treated all men equally and fairly regardless of color of skin and demanded that subordinate leaders do the same. As a result, morale in the Schutztruppe stayed at the highest levels even in times of hardship. All men fought side by side realizing that no one was greater than the other. Many Germans and Africans died while attempting to protect each other. The British on the other hand, made a fatal mistake in both the treatment of Africans and their perception in their abilities. Underestimating the German Askaris skill and tenacity, the British attacked time and time again with the belief that Askaris were far inferior to their own troops. This misconception would cost the Allies dearly in the years to come.<sup>46</sup>

## **EVENTUAL SURRENDER**

Lettow-Vorbeck did not have a direct communication link with Germany. As a result, news reports were obtained from captured mail, conversations with British prisoners of war and discussions with local residents. He had no idea of the gravity of the situation on the European continent and could only guess as to the true indications of the German war effort outside of Africa. His army was winning the war as he imagined it would. He was fully prepared to continue fighting for as long as it took to support the war effort of Germany. His campaign was succeeding and his force was still extremely strong with adequate amounts of personnel, weapons, ammunition and food. Only after capturing a British messenger did he learn of the armistice that had been agreed to by Germany that called on him to order a cease-fire among his troops.<sup>47</sup> Later, under receipt of a telegram forwarded under a flag of truce did he truly realize the military situation of Germany and understand that his army was to fight no more.<sup>48</sup> His army, a fighting force that for four years had stood up to the best that a quarter of a million enemy troops could throw at it was never defeated in battle but forced to surrender because the war effort in Germany had ceased to exist.<sup>49</sup> As a leader, Lettow-Vorbeck's surrender came with the distinction and prestige of a force that had never been captured nor defeated in four years of battle.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **THE BEST OF PRUSSIAN MILITARY**

Lettow-Vorbeck exemplified the best of the Prussian military. He was a professional that demanded discipline of the highest order. In battle, his tactics were sound. As a strategist he waged a successful campaign that lasted for four years. He learned to appreciate the value of the African soldier and the terrain upon which he waged war. But most importantly of all, he promoted excellence in all things. He held training and the conduct of such to the highest of standards. He treated all men equally and punished only when necessary. He was a leader of men that characterized the true value of professionalism and gentlemanly conduct. Subordinates executed orders immediately without question. Lettow-Vorbeck was one of the most gifted of all Prussian military soldiers and his performance demonstrated this fact time and time again.

### **WINNING AGAINST OVERWHELMING ODDS**

Lettow-Vorbeck was a success. He proved to be a genius in the art of bush warfare, a man of indomitable spirit—a most remarkable leader of men who did not know what it was to be

beaten.<sup>50</sup> At the conclusion of the war effort in East Africa, the British employed a force consisting of six separate elements that attempted to chase and capture Lettow-Vorbeck and his soldiers. They failed, however, these six British units, the smallest of them consisting of three battalions were each larger than Lettow-Vorbeck's.<sup>51</sup>

It is almost infeasible to realize and recognize all of the accomplishments of Lettow-Vorbeck and his soldiers. They fought against incredible odds with virtually no external support yet survived in a harsh environment for months at a time. Lettow-Vorbeck accomplished all that he had set out to do and more. He had kept a large number of British troops employed to the very end.<sup>52</sup>

#### RESPECT AND SUCCESS ON THE BATTLEFIELD

Lettow-Vorbeck was a leader who earned the respect of his subordinates. He was highly successful in waging a campaign against the British for four years. Berlin considered him a hero and after the battle of Taveta in August 1914 when he captured the British garrison he earned the distinction of being the first and only German commander of the war to occupy British soil.<sup>53</sup>

Even while outnumbered at times by forces greater than twenty to one he never quit. He surrendered only when asked by his superiors in Germany. He successfully tied down hundreds of thousands of men, dozens of ships and millions of pounds in equipment by a force that never numbered more than three thousand Germans and eleven thousand Africans.<sup>54</sup>

Lettow-Vorbeck was a man of great vision and leadership. He adapted his force to wage a guerrilla type warfare that modified its weaponry to meet technological advances of his adversaries. His exploits in the African bush have come down to students of warfare as the greatest single guerrilla operation in history.<sup>55</sup> We can learn much by studying Lettow-Vorbeck and the manner in which he waged war to accomplish strategic objectives.

WORD COUNT = 6601

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Regina van Chi-Bonnardel, The Atlas of Africa (New York, New York: The Free Press, 1973), 248.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Miller, Battle for the Bundu; The First World War in East Africa (New York, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1974), 94.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>4</sup> Edwin P. Hoyt, Guerilla: Colonel von Lettow-Vorbeck and Germany's East African Empire (New York, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1981), 125.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>6</sup> Brigadier-General Charles P. Fendall, The East African Force 1915-1919; an unofficial record of its creation and fighting career, together with some account of the civil and military administrative conditions in East Africa before and during that period (London: H.F. & G. Witherby, 1921), 67.

<sup>7</sup> Hoyt, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Miller, 39.

<sup>9</sup> Miller, 39-40.

<sup>10</sup> Fendall, 67.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Hoyt, 86.

<sup>13</sup> Miller, 40.

<sup>14</sup> Hoyt, 69.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>16</sup> Miller, 39.

<sup>17</sup> Hoyt, 15.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>19</sup> Fendall, 68.

<sup>20</sup> Hoyt, 116.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>23</sup> Captain Walter D. Downes, With the Nigerians in German East Africa (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1919), 15.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

<sup>25</sup> Miller, 40.

<sup>26</sup> Hoyt, 10.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>28</sup> Miller, 94.

<sup>29</sup> Hoyt, 66.

<sup>30</sup> Miller, 94.

<sup>31</sup> Hoyt, 68.

<sup>32</sup> Miller, 99.

<sup>33</sup> Hoyt, 90.

<sup>34</sup> Miller, 100.

<sup>35</sup> Hoyt, 119.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>42</sup> Miller, 314.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Hoyt, 110.

<sup>45</sup> Fendall, 116.

<sup>46</sup> Hoyt, 96.

<sup>47</sup> Miller, 322.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>50</sup> Downes, 298.

<sup>51</sup> Hoyt, 188.

<sup>52</sup> Fendall, 223.

<sup>53</sup> Miller, 43.

<sup>54</sup> Hoyt, 140.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 203.



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